

EDUCATIONAL BANKRUPTCY AND THE HILLSDALE VISION

By John B. Muller

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He delivered this presentation at a Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar entitled, "Looking Back from A.D. 2000: A Balance Sheet on Twentieth-Century American Civilization."

No one can be a psychologist, invited to share a few thoughts on American education yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and resist the temptation to begin with a reminiscence of his own home life and education. I have to confess that I hated school more than I have hated anything else in my life. So much of it seemed phony, or at least pointless.

A good example was senior English, the only real substance of which was one short paper at the beginning of the year and one more at the end. I had an uncharitable suspicion or two about this teacher, so I gave my first paper of that year to my friend Ewald Barty, a student of mediocre reputation, to hand in as his *second* paper. Sure enough, Ewald got a 78 for the same theme on which I had earlier gotten a 93.



But I am not here to tell you how bad the past was. I am here, alas, to tell you that the contemporary scene in education is decidedly worse.

Our Tradition

Education is always an instrument of social values and social policy, so that understanding the broader social context is important in understanding education. As Richard Weaver states, "Ideas have consequences."

At the close of the nineteenth century there was a broad consensus on the ends and means of education. Man was still knowable and ennobled. The word still contained the heroic and the tragic. This was so in part because man was writ small and reality large. Both nature and the moral realm were created, were real, but both were made known to man through revelation and

im•pri•mis (im-pry-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things)....

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through his crowning gift, reason. Man recognized his weakness, he had feet of clay, indeed he was sinful. His quest was to reach upward and outward. He was to master the natural world, and himself, in accordance with his true freedom. It was a world with a metaphysical center and a responsible, principled freedom. It existed in a dynamic tension with the openness of the American frontier and the unrealized ideal of equality before the law.

Education thus functioned in the context of a widely agreed-upon moral order and image of man, and there were stable institutional structures, to wit, churches and the family, primarily responsible for its maintenance. Education emphasized man as both a rational and a moral agent, striving for excellence within a known cosmos and metaphysic. It was primarily designed to teach content and reasoning skills within an atmosphere of discipline, honesty, hard work, and authority. Benches were made to be hard and playgrounds muddy, spare the rod and spoil the child.

But this tradition was under attack in the academy as the twentieth century began. Authority, rationalism, discipline, natural law, and a metaphysical center were all being called in question. Men have always wanted to be gods, if not God, and they have always had an inkling of the consequences. In mythology, Icarus' wings melted as he neared the sun, and Sisyphus was condemned never to have his stone reach the top of the hill. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, pride is singled out as perhaps the greatest sin. Many of the leaders in education and psychology in the early decades of this century were the sons of Protestant clergy, well equipped to know this, and yet they were looking for a new ethos: they would be as gods through education and psychology.

One trend turned inward and psychologized reality. Man became a god-animal who would create reality and himself according to what felt good. The other trend turned outward, and man came to be seen as a machine, fueled by appetite but programmable into the most marvelous patterns imaginable.

The background for these trends in the early decades of this century was an entrepreneurial high in America's economic development. It was the heyday of the self-made man. We not only mastered nature, we created opportunity and we created ourselves. Then we ran head on into the Great Depression—the greatest shock to our national psyche of this century. We responded to that shock with social utopianism, statism, and the widely influential philosophy of education that John Dewey called “instrumentalism.”

The Challenge

Dewey's instrumentalism lays down two basic, self-reinforcing principles to guide all education: scientific method and democracy. Education, in this view, ulti-

mately has a social end, and in a democratic society education is both democratic and for democracy. This is a utopian view in which excellence is individualized for everyone. To this end, Dewey held, there was really only one method of obtaining knowledge, and that was the individual testing of scientific method.

Many of the latter-day consequences of instrumentalism have been far from what John Dewey intended. Scientific method simply cannot carry the burden Dewey charged it with. It can only examine the consequences of values under given assumptions in specified contexts. Claiming this as adequate is in fact making a meta-ethical statement—all values are relative and determined by individual testing. Of course, demo-



cratizing education makes excellence itself relative. It places the underlying stress on process and individual judgment. This may be workable with a strong set of values that transcend subjectivism and provide a stable framework for commitment and responsibility. However, if process becomes the *end* of education as well as its method, then both education and society are in trouble.

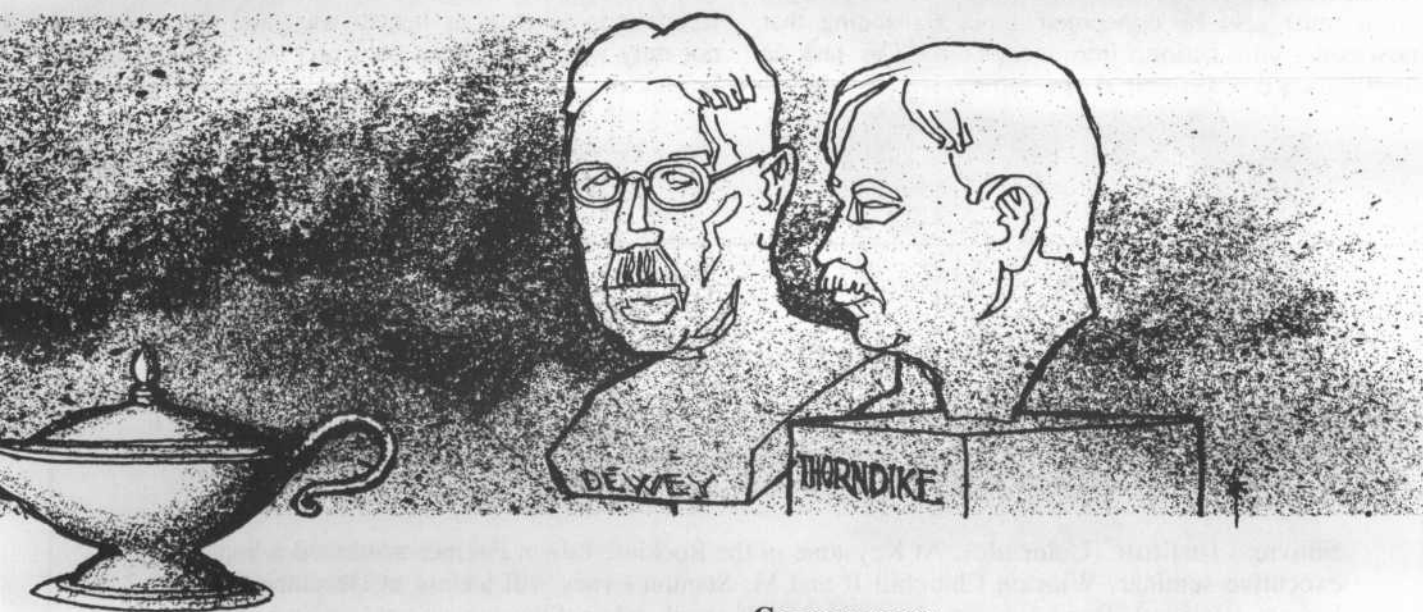
There is evidence today that America has arrived at exactly this result. Science shifted from rationalism to positivism, where all knowledge was sensory-based, where reason became a formal tool without truth-value, and where ethics was reduced to mere emotional preferences. That earlier American ethos, which had maintained a creative tension between its Judeo-Christian values and its encouragement of material success through individual initiative, ran first into the Great Depression, then into the Holocaust. Americans responded by redefining Christianity in immanent, social, and existential terms. The response of American education, specifically, was the “do your own thing” ethic: design your own programs, clarify your emotions, learn to make money, and learn to be entertained if not happy.

Alongside all of this, meanwhile, our century has seen a second major strain of development, one which started at Columbia under the impetus of E. L. Thorndike. This trend, too, emphasized the scientific method, but it used the scientific method to discover *how* people learn. It stressed objectivity, not personal testing and experiencing. The most important aspect of Thorndike's thought is his "law of effect." Actions or behaviors, this theory goes, are stamped in as the result of their consequences: pleasurable consequences strengthen connections, while unpleasurable ones weaken them.

The most radical expression of these behavioristic theories is the work of B. F. Skinner. Skinner claims

also viewed the fundamental determinants as irrational; reason was a surface phenomenon that is the handmaiden of deeper irrational and emotional drives.

Freudian theory, certainly as interpreted by Americans, had a fundamental maxim: "Thou shalt not frustrate thy child." Emotional expression was seen as the key to both health and happiness. In this system, one not only turns irrationally inward, but one loses one's reality constraints. The parents' task is to see that the child doesn't encounter limits, yet this actually undercuts the ability to feel or to find meaning. Feeling cannot be simply glandular! The loss of constraints and contingency eventually involves loss of intentionality.



that science is, or should be, atheoretical and purely descriptive. Descriptive categories are apparently givens, and all we need to do is count categories over time. Second, the method is turned into a social philosophy. This is a fascinating feat of self-contradictory mental gymnastics that ultimately denies the existence of consciousness itself. For Skinner, education is merely programming where one controls both stimuli and outcomes. Values are individuals' response preferences which may be biologically based or inferred from behavior. "Programs" may be administered by machines or by humans with simple programming. Such behavioral theories are a disaster as a basis for educational philosophy.

There is one other key influence in the first half of the twentieth century, one that embraces both this concept of mechanism and the Dewey concept of subjective experience. This is Sigmund Freud. Freud's model of personality begins with a determined life, not an examined life. It sees every action, no matter how trivial or seemingly accidental, as determined. Freud

Consequences

But what do these few rag-tag theories, each of which has aspects that seem patently absurd, have to do with education in America today? The answer is, they have everything to do with it. They have shaped the general values and moral vision (such as it is) of the academy in our time—and these in turn produce the surface phenomena of contemporary education. A few typical examples of these phenomena would include the following:

- A recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* had a boldface headline bannering the fact that SAT scores finally levelled out this year after an eighteen-year decline. During most of that decline the primary response of educators was to press for changes in the SAT test, most of them in my view unjustified, so that people would score higher.
- Students' reading and writing abilities have also steadily declined. Professor Jacques Barzun of Columbia decries the scandal of graduating high school seniors with eighth-grade reading abilities. It is a make-believe world where everyone passes.

We are acquiescing in a systematic debasement of the language, and from this inevitably follows a loss of both thinking and sensing.

- Faculty unions in the South have threatened to strike because some states have recently mandated competency exams for certification. One group even went so far as to argue that competency in subject-matter was not really important, since their skills in *methods* were sufficient to make them good teachers.
- A recent survey found that some elementary schools spend as little as 18½ hours a week on real instruction.
- The New Jersey Supreme Court has ruled that Princeton University cannot prohibit or even restrict political organizing by outside non-student groups. The plaintiffs argued that Princeton is a quasi-public utility, that so many people use its streets that universal access cannot be denied. There is a long history of litigation arguing that higher education is so important to society that it inherently becomes a state agency, representing a "social good" which predominates over private property and First Amendment rights; but to my knowledge this argument has never before succeeded. This time it did.
- The University of Missouri refused to let a student religious group hold regular non-denominational meetings in any university facility, including the student center. The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in the students' favor, but the university appealed it to the U.S. Supreme Court on the grounds of separation of church and state. It is my view that the university's appeal represents, in the broadest sense of the term, the attempt to establish a state religion, or perhaps more properly a state non-religion. Fortunately, the Supreme Court ruled against the university.

These are a few of the symptoms. But more important is the fact that even the current ethos, muddled as it is, is itself unraveling. American education still has a vision of sorts, but it is poorly articulated and, what is worse, it isn't working. The lack of a genuine moral perspective has sent it wandering off in several directions.

It sees itself as a growth industry that is no longer growing; there is a panicky sense that it must repackage its wares to capture a larger market share. A lot of current educational programs are based on this belief that market research can establish educational goals and that education should be justified by market return. On this view, education is not to civilize or to transform; it is to meet a perceived market need.

Technology is of course the most marketable academic commodity, and science has ridden the crest of twentieth-century thought. Following Sputnik, educators put a great deal of emphasis on science, and yet

now, a quarter-century later, we face perhaps our greatest scientific challenges.

On an airplane recently, I sat next to a Chinese physicist who was positively morose. He was the head of a research laboratory in Massachusetts, associating with the elite of industry and the academy, and in his view America is sadly lacking in technological education. He allowed as how we still have perhaps two first-rate graduate schools, but a disproportionate number of even their students are foreign nationals. American industry is still competitive, he said, but it remains competitive by buying foreign brains. How much longer will we be able to outbid the rest of the Western world for its finest minds?

So it would appear that we are failing even in those areas to which we have given the greatest stress and the greatest legitimacy. We are failing because of an inadequate moral vision. This is seen most clearly in the almost universal dropping of a core curriculum. The academy simply could no longer legitimize making qualitative decisions for students.

This does not mean the academy has no moral vision. On the contrary, it prides itself in the creation of a "new moral order"—but it is a moral order that is basically anti-intellectual. Its values are egalitarian, environmentalist, and utopian. Man creates himself, and educators are the priestly class. The fatal flaw is that the whole cult is built around what James Hitchcock has termed the imperial self. Egocentrically feeling good is the piper that calls the tune for education today. So we have a world of entitlements, a world without a center, a world with much ado and no foundation.

The academy's moral vision is what Philip Rueft labels the therapeutic society. Let's redo tests so everyone scores well, let's recognize all dialects as equals, let art be a happening, let ethics be discovering what makes you feel good, and let's teach composition by using audio tapes. All perspectives are equal if you feel about them equally; you can only understand what you "experience." Thus we have black studies, ethnic studies, feminist studies.

We are producing students that Stephen Muller, President of Johns Hopkins, labels as highly skilled barbarians, a society of what T. S. Eliot calls "hollow men." Our technical education is failing because the academy's moral vision gives little credence to honesty, to discipline, to integrity. The vision of an imperial self in a therapeutic society is so small and so fragmented that it soon collapses into ennui or vapid sentiment.

We live, I'm afraid, in a plastic culture, a culture that stresses emotion, expression, appetite, and material goods. Our genius is that we have provided a culture with fewer constraints than any man has yet devised. (What better example than the fact that the

State of Michigan will award you disability pay if your supervisor makes you feel "anxious.") Ours is a non-contingent culture, an entitlement culture. Not only are our values eccentric, turning inward without responsibility, but society now provides the largesse to remove more and more of us from even the constraints of physical well-being. Such a culture is essentially a parasite, retaining its vitality only by draining the moral capital built up by its traditions. America has seriously drawn on its reserves.

Educational Statism

I have earlier noted the strong, and in many ways healthy, utopian strain in our tradition. But it is hard for an egocentric ethos to be both bacchanalian, as ours is, and at the same time utopian. To have both we must turn to the state as the chief moral agent, since it alone can provide the entitlements and the environments that will make us happy—not wise, not free, but sated. The key to the therapeutic society is the educational system that manufactures man out of his environment. The higher value is the state, but the engine of coercion is also the state. That is the paradox that makes it all go sour.

Faced with increasing competition, all levels of education have turned to government for emergency financing, and government has provided it using debased funds. The congruence of these two trends has added a whole new agenda for education—an agenda of social reconstruction. Some programs, such as affirmative action and the Buckley Amendment, have increasingly degraded educational quality. Others, like Title IX and handicap access, have so far had their primary effect through burdensome new costs.

Government regulation has another impact: it turns education away from the kind of informal, personal communities where genuine learning is best fostered, toward ever more ponderous bureaucracies. It formalizes and institutionalizes adversary relationships. Everyone has his rights, everyone has his due process, and no one is assumed to have goodwill, integrity, or moral vision. Indeed no one is allowed to. Students sue professors because they didn't get an A or, sadly, because the course was a sham, and administrators must fret over such questions as whether it is legal to tell the parents of an 18 year-old that their child just attempted suicide.

It is also obvious that money is power, and that government is increasingly using that power. Hillsdale College's own protracted litigation with the federal government over its refusal to sign a Title IX compliance form is a primary example. It is not an issue of discrimination, for there already exist ample statutes to police this, and anyway no one has charged Hillsdale with discrimination. The issue is, does the government in principle have total control of private education?

Until Title IX, an institution was subject to federal control only if it directly accepted federal funds, and even then only the specific programs receiving those funds were subject to control. But now the Title IX regulations purport to extend controls to institutions at which students spend benefits they have received as individuals. Title IX also extends control to all aspects of institutional life, not just specific programs.

It is indeed to Hillsdale's credit, and most particularly to the credit of President Roche and the Board of Trustees, that the college has opposed Title IX compliance on grounds of principle.

Hillsdale's Vision

Clearly, fantasia is in trouble. One of the most salient trends of the 1980s, I believe, will be the loss of public faith in education, leading to a resultant loss of funds. Teachers' unions and administrators will probably respond by playing power politics, and this will only further undercut education's moral authority and public esteem. The outcome, we can hope, will be a fundamental challenge to the present dominant ethos of social reconstruction and the therapeutic society, perhaps leading to the rejection of this whole ethos.

The immediate debate is over competence, over returning to a structured learning environment and teaching basic skills. This does not mean education can simply be viewed as drill sergeants programming robots. The concepts of internal motivation and lifelong learning, though much abused, remain valid—but they must not be purchased at the expense of excellence and an adequate moral vision.

At a minimum we must get beyond the maxim, "Human life is no different than any other kind of life." At a minimum we need a world that allows for heroism and tragedy, a world where we quest for self-transcendence and recognize that there is mystery in life, and there is evil. It must be a world where there is more to reality than the accidental, a world where men are free but responsible, a world where they must reach outward and upward to achieve that freedom.

This is easy to say, but how do we do it? One of the great tasks is to establish a proper respect for reason. We are moving beyond the sterile formulas of positivism and analytic philosophy, beyond the semiotics of behaviorism, but much remains to be done. We cannot, on the other hand, establish reason as our god, for it cannot bear that much of a burden. History shows us that so burdened it leads to holocaust.

Thus we must look also to our tradition, to those forms of moral vision and excellence that persist over many cultural variations. We must see the forms of hubris and see where they have led us. We again must be stirred by the great literature, art, and music. Computer terminals on every desk are fine, but such seductive hardware only increases the need for an adequate

moral vision. It is not enough to memorize a moral vision; we must in fact strive to *be* free, to be whole, to put more back in than we take out.

The utopian state in our century has asked primary and secondary education to do too much. Education was to be the engineer of social reconstruction, but that reconstruction proved instead to be self-destructive. It was found to come only at the expense of some of the basic values necessary for learning and achievement. Basic values, we have learned at great cost, must be taught first by the family and then appropriately reinforced—not undermined—by the schools.

As for higher education, it needs to place increased emphasis on ethics, on the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman tradition, and on the integration of knowledge. But it must also be concerned about translating that knowledge into action, into leadership. The task is admittedly very difficult if the family has failed, but

education in an informal, personal community is the most effective medium for translating values into action. Professors of principle bring the moral vision to life; they apply the abstract in countless ways. In an important sense values are “caught, not taught,” and this is why Hillsdale and colleges like it—with their moral vision and their sense of personal community—are so important as we face the remainder of the twentieth century.

Whether one is a student today, a parent, a teacher, or simply a well-wisher of American education and America itself, I would remind you that you don’t have to be Captain Ahab questing after the white whale to be heroic: the struggle against ennui and barbarism asks quite enough from each of us. The quest for principled freedom is as great as it ever was, and you address it not only with great ideas but every day in how ye shall live.

Hillsdale’s Widening Outreach of Ideas, Autumn 1982

Center for Constructive Alternatives (Michigan). October seminar on the Presidency featured F. Clifton White, Ray Price, Eugene McCarthy, and others. November seminar on ethnic America includes talks by Walter Williams, Ben Fernandez, Jay Parker.

Shavano Institute (Colorado). At Keystone in the Rockies, Edwin Fuenler addressed a September executive seminar, Winston Churchill II and M. Stanton Evans will lecture at December seminar. Robert Bleiberg, Reed Larson, and others will speak when Shavano comes to New York and Washington November 19-20.

Shavano “Counterpoint” TV Series (WTBS Atlanta). Millions tuned in as George Roche hosted the first three debates on welfare, disarmament, and unions. A flood of favorable calls blew out the WTBS switchboard after the August show. Viewers from 42 states wrote in after the September show. *Barron’s* commented: “Meaningful, balanced television.” The Associated Press review stated: “The winner here is the free exchange of ideas.”

Here and There. President Reagan has appointed George Roche to a key advisory post as Chairman of the National Council on Educational Research.... Author Bruce Bartlett gave the year’s first Von Mises Lecture in Economics at Hillsdale in September.... Arthur Shenfield, Tom Bethel, and Fritz Machlup are among contributors to the 1981-82 volume of Mises lectures, now out from the Hillsdale College Press.



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